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SUBJECT: HAMAS "THE LEAST OF WORRIES" ACCORDING TO ABU MAZEN'S TEAM IN GAZA

Classified By: A/DCM Norm Olsen, per 1.5(B) AND (D).

This message has been coordinated with ConGen Jerusalem.

1. (C) Summary: Senior Abu Mazen confidants in the Gaza Strip Marwan Kanafani, Marwan Abdul-Hamid, and Abdullah Effrangi told Poloff January 11 that Abu Mazen is determined to bring the numerous militant splinter groups "back into the Fatah fold," but, to do so, must first provide both physical security from Israeli attacks and the financial security of alternative employment. Senior Hamas leaders in Gaza have apparently walked back from January 10-11 public statements casting doubt upon the legitimacy of Abu Mazen's mandate, according to PLC Political Committee Chairman Marwan Kanafani. Kanafani and others further categorized dealing with Hamas as a lower priority than successfully reintegrating the Fatah militias. End Summary.

"When We say Fatah Now, We Mean Abu Mazen"

2. (C) Fatah Revolutionary Council member Marwan Abdul-Hamid was ebullient in a conversation with Poloff January 11, boasting that "when we say Fatah now, we mean Abu Mazen." Everyone participated in the elections, Abdul-Hamid crowed, even some Hamas members. The goal of Abu Mazen supporters now, he continued, is to strengthen what he called the Abu Mazen stream within Fatah in the run-up to the PLC elections, now scheduled for July 17.

3. (C) PLC Political Committee chairman Marwan Kanafani told Poloff January 11 that the Gaza political leadership is meeting to assess a situation that Kanafani described as "going in the right direction for the first time in years." Citing what he called a new willingness to cooperate among fractious political factions, Kanafani said that expectations of Abu Mazen are so high that Kanafani worries about the performance of the new government and how it could possibly meet them. Abu Mazen "has six months, at most" to deliver, according to Kanafani, and will need to prioritize what has to be done.

"Hamas is the Least of My Worries"

4. (C) When asked about the January 11 statements from the Hamas spokesman and other Hamas leaders in Gaza that questioned the legitimacy of Abu Mazen's mandate because of claimed low voter turnout, Kanafani said bluntly that "Hamas is the least of my concerns." (Note: The charge of less than 50 percent turnout is only applicable if the turnout is calculated from the out-of-date civil registry. International observers and the CEC, however, determined voter turnout at 71 percent based on the recently compiled voter registration list. End Note). Kanafani said the he met January 11 with senior Hamas members who wished to "clarify" that it had not been the organization's intention to call into question the legitimacy of Abu Mazen's electoral victory. Rather, the statements were intended simply as a "reminder" to Abu Mazen that he should hold a national referendum before deciding major issues such as resuming talks with the Israelis or "disarming" the Intifadah. Despite down-playing the challenge posed by Hamas, Kanafani hastened to add that Abu Mazen intends to meet with Hamas leaders when he returns to Gaza after his inauguration. "Our contacts with Hamas are constant," he said.

5. (C) Abdul-Hamid made a similar point with regard to the Hamas statements, stressing that the true spokesman of Hamas, Khaled Misha'el in Damascus, called Abu Mazen personally January 10 to congratulate him on his victory. Abdul-Hamid dismissed Hamas "mutterings" in the Gaza Strip as an effort to "remind people they are still here." Abu Mazen has loudly and bravely condemned the rocket attacks in the Gaza Strip, he said, despite warnings from some advisors that this position would cost him votes. Instead, the opposite proved to be true, Abdul-Hamid claimed, and people who had been afraid to criticize militant activity rallied to Abu Mazen for having the courage to say the previously unspeakable and cast their vote accordingly. People in Gaza, according to Abdul-Hamid, are almost begging Abu Mazen to "save them from Hamas's chaotic policies."

Fatah's Militant Splinters Looking for Security

16. (C) Abdul-Hamid confidently stated that "all" Fatah militants are also Abu Mazen supporters, implying that they will obey orders intended to increase Israel's security and thus reduce the subsequent need for IDF operations in Gaza. When pressed, however, Abdul-Hamid admitted that Abu Mazen is expected to deliver something in return to the Fatah faithful. What they are looking for, according to Abdul-Hamid, are security from targeted Israeli attacks, assassinations and arrest operations, and a decent future (read: jobs). Abu Mazen urgently needs to reach an agreement with the Israelis to stop "hunting" the militants, said Abdul-Hamid, who urged the U.S. to press Israel on this point. Then, Abdul-Hamid continued, Abu Mazen must find a way to "absorb" the militants, most likely into the various security bodies, so that they can have an income that allows them to provide for their families. Abu Mazen needs help, Abdul-Hamid said, and lots of it -- soon.

17. (C) Fatah Central Committee member Abdullah Effrangi recently told Poloff that Abu Mazen had made serious efforts to reach out to Fatah's militant splinter groups during his pre-election campaign swing through the Gaza Strip (Note: Indeed, Abu Mazen boasted to visiting Senator John Kerry on January 10 that he had met with all the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades leaders, "from southern Gaza to the northern West Bank." End Note). Despite the difficulty of bringing his message home when delivering it from amid the rubble of destroyed houses in, for example, Khan Yunis, Abu Mazen will, according to Effrangi, continue to work the issue with all of the militant factions because it is essential to bring the fighters back "inside" mainstream Fatah. It is simply too dangerous for Palestinian society not to do so. After attending a number of campaign rallies, Effrangi said that he is confident that Abu Mazen's message is being received and that fighters are, indeed, "willing to come back" into the Fatah fold. The Fatah leadership, he concluded, has determined that it must give these men a chance and is now looking for ways to reincorporate them into official structures. While Effrangi felt that it was easiest to funnel the fighters into the security organizations, he did not rule out finding them jobs elsewhere.

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